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Young, Black & Out of Work: Study Explores Unemployment Crisis in Chicago

By **Kelly Bauer** and **Andrea V Watson**

About half of black 20- to 24-year-old men are out of work and school in Chicago, outpacing state and national numbers, according to a new report. About half of black 20- to 24-year-old men are out of work and school in Chicago, outpacing state and national numbers, according to a new report.

While the issue is pervasive across the country, people of color are particularly hard hit by a “crisis of joblessness” in the city, according to a report from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Forty-seven percent of black men and 20 percent of Hispanic or Latino men 20 to 24 years old are out of work and school, while only 10 percent of white men in the same age group are out of work and school, according to the report.

Young people in the city have sought jobs, according to the report, but Chicago lags behind major cities like New York and Los Angeles when it comes to employment of young black and Latino people. Activists have called on the government to commit to creating jobs for young people, saying they are “disconnected” and that has created violence issues in the city.

Roosevelt Wood, a young black man who’s received guidance from the Youth Advocate Program of Chicago, said providing more jobs and opportunities for people of color would help decrease violence.



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“If more jobs was opened up to the youth, there wouldn’t be nobody killing. They would be thinking about a check and the way that they would be able to eat,” Wood said, speaking at a Monday morning conference on the joblessness crisis. “If we had more programs like [the Youth Advocate Program] ... I feel as if there would be less violence going on and more youth employment.”

The statistics on teen unemployment are even more grim. Ninety percent of black teens do not have year-round jobs in Chicago, and 79 percent of Hispanic or Latino teens face the same issue in the city, accord-

ing to organizers.

Amber Velasquez, a 17-year-old Latina woman, said she received her first job through a program and it helped her “a lot,” connecting her with a mentor and growing her skills. That work helped Velasquez find her current job, which enables her to help provide for her family, she said.

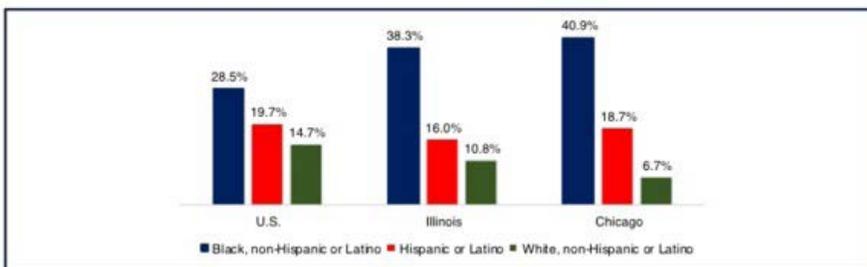
Responding to the report, Mayor Rahm Emanuel said the report is a red flag for the city.

“That 47 percent not in school or not working is a flashing red light that we have a lot of work ahead of us,” said Emanuel, after an event highlighting a plan to offer mortgage assistance in Chatham.

He said he’s been making sure community colleges are offering educations that “relevant” to the jobs available.

We “need to make sure every part of Chicago is better prepared for the future to compete for jobs,” he said.

Other young people at the conference spoke of struggling to pay their bills and provide for their families because they could not find



Percent of 20 to 24 Year Olds Who Were Out of School and Out of Work in the U.S., Illinois, and Chicago in 2014

Source: 2014 American Community Survey, public use files, tabulations by Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago.

work despite applying for jobs again and again.

The report found that being unemployed while young causes “permanent scars,” including a lower likelihood of holding a job later in life and receiving lower wages.

Those “permanent scars” create a cycle of employment and social issues at home and within neighborhoods, according to the report, citing the example of teen girls having children in households “with high rates of poverty and low levels of employment where feelings of low self-esteem, depression and powerlessness are often accompanied by substance abuse and, in many cases, violence and crime.”

Speaking at Monday’s conference, a 25-year-old black man named David said he was unemployed, “destructive” and part of a Garfield Park gang before finding a path to success through a summer job as a teen.

“From having a summer job, I’ve gained so many skills,” he said. “These organizations and these jobs, they’re very critical to the lives of our young people.”

Neighborhoods with large black populations feature the highest rates of youth joblessness and lowest rates of employment, while neighborhoods with large white populations have the lowest rates of youth joblessness and highest rates of employment.

The Chicago Urban League and other organizations are calling for the nation to employ 2 million young, jobless people, and wants Cook County to commit to employing 35,000 “disconnected” young people in summer and year-round programs.

The organizations also want a Youth Employment Crisis Action Task Force to be created to examine the city, county and state’s problems with “disconnected youth.”

Those actions would provide young people with the skills they need to become “productive and successful adults,” keep the local economy competitive and decrease violence, according to organizers.

